

The University of Chicago

THE OPTIMUM SIZE OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY UNIT

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE LIBRARY
SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1945

By
LOWELL MARTIN

Reprinted from
Carleton B. Joeckel (ed.), *Library Extension: Problems and Solutions*
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RECOGNITION of the need for larger units of public library service is only the beginning of library extension wisdom. Several questions logically arise as plans for achieving larger units are formulated. Chief among these is the perennial question, "How large?"

Extension workers have asserted the advantages of the larger unit approach for many years. Yet, even today, the observer is often more impressed by the resistance toward enlargement of library administrative areas than by the limited progress made.

This frame of mind shifts attention from the virtues of larger units to the surprising tenacity of smaller units. It may not foster agreement with the factors perpetuating localism, but it does suggest respect for them. It brings into the picture certain personal and political affiliations which may be reprehensible but which are social facts nonetheless. Optimum size of public library units will therefore be approached first from the standpoint of the centralization-decentralization conflict which currently characterizes most public service institutions in the United States.

THE ROLE OF LOCALISM IN LIBRARY EXTENSION

Localism is the villain in the library extension scene. Librarians hiss him whenever he appears. Local people, told of his villainy, politely join in the fun. This reaction is proper, but it does nothing to remove the villain. In fact, he thrives on such treatment; local sentiments are likely to be strongest when they are challenged.

Somewhere off stage is the hero—larger units. He makes fleeting appearances in the form of a bookmobile or an efficient little branch library. Local folks as well as librarians hail his appearance. But later the local people may confuse the characters and sympathize with the human villain rather than with the impersonal hero. One is symbolized to them by the little ivy-covered structure just off the main square, their local library—the other by a branch of a distant library or a right to use the townfolks' library on occasional visits to town.

Honesty compels us to admit that there is more than provincialism in the native's reaction; prudence cautions us against taking a cavalier attitude toward his views. The seven thousand public libraries in the United States have not been established by fiat of state or nation. For better or worse, they are the product of localism. Without past local support, we would not have existing libraries out of which to build larger units. Without future local support, we may not have library service to be fitted into any units, either large or small.

We are prone to see localism and regionalism in opposition and to deplore the first as we advocate the second. If the advantages of regionalism must be gained at the expense of localism, the advance will be questionable, for we will have sacrificed one of the bases of American service institutions. One sometimes has the impression that librarians talk in one breath about becoming bigger in large administrative units and in the next breath about becoming smaller in community-adjusted service programs. Actually the two are not contradictory; neither are they independent. Both aims must be worked out together if both are to be achieved.

This train of thought is not an argument against larger units of library service. It merely emphasizes the continuing force of localism in the American way of life. It highlights the local community as a way of living together that meets some of the needs of an interdependent society and a functioning democracy. And it underlines the necessity for retaining local social support of libraries, integrating library areas with community life, and devising methods of democratic policy control within larger units.

For an analysis of optimum size of library units this train of thought suggests a general principle: In the American scene the standard minimum size of library units should be kept as small as is consistent with our concept of minimum adequate service.

DESIRABLE MAXIMUM SIZE

While optimum size in this paper means primarily desirable minimum size, a glance at the other side of the same problem, maximum size, will not be out of place.

The whole matter of optimum size of library units may be viewed as a balance of two conflicting forces. On the one hand are the resource advantages of the larger unit, represented, for example, by the increased subject range of the book collection; on the other hand, the personal service advantages of the small unit, represented by the li-

brarian's acquaintance with most of the users. These two opposing tendencies come into balance at whatever point one accepts as a desirable minimum level of service. Beyond the point of balance the advantages of size become relatively less important, and size as such may be said to have decreasing value.

The point of balance differs, depending on which group of readers one has in mind and on the extent to which both small and large libraries take steps to counteract their natural handicaps. Readers whose needs are highly specialized find the equally specialized book stock and personnel of the very largest libraries suited to their needs. But readers whose tastes, while discriminating, are not specialized—readers in the vast area of popular reading to which the American public library is so considerably dedicated—probably find huge size and complex organization a handicap rather than a help. The point of balance also differs to the extent that the small library has access to such devices as rotating and reservoir collections in state or other centers and to the extent that the large library particularizes its services for distinguishable groups of readers.

For substantial popular reading many of the larger libraries have resorted to selected collections, called popular libraries or open-shelf rooms, which amount to small libraries within large establishments. The collections of these popular rooms are very similar to the adult collections of the better small city libraries serving twenty thousand to twenty-five thousand people. For a certain sizable group of readers, the Chicago Public Library is probably neither more nor less effective than the Burlington, Iowa, Public Library; in fact, the Chicago Public Library must set up a special popular collection if it is going to be even as effective.

Also noteworthy are the smaller per capita library circulation figures and smaller proportional registration figures in large cities. Other cultural activities and other libraries in the large centers are advanced as reasons for the difference, and correctly so in the case of the few biggest cities. But an inventory of cultural and book resources in most American cities of a quarter-million population would not be very different from an inventory in a city one-tenth the size. In both cases the cultural list would not extend much beyond movie houses, a public auditorium, and an open-air band shell, and the book resources list would stop with a few small bookstores and perhaps a college library in addition to the public library. One cannot help but wonder if the greater average distance to a library out-

let in large cities contributes to the variation. Some attention should be given to the unserved millions living within the boundaries of cities but beyond a practical distance from a local library. There is a library extension problem within corporate boundaries as well as beyond them.

The relation of huge size in public libraries to quality and quantity of service is wide open for study. The analysis is likely to prove enlightening if the investigator does not reject at the start the possibility that service efficiency in libraries, as in museums, may decrease beyond a certain size limit.

DESIRABLE MINIMUM SIZE

What is the desirable minimum size of unit that should be the basis for public library service? This question has occupied students of librarianship at home and abroad, and the answers, in terms of people and dollars, have ranged from a few thousand to a few hundred thousand.

"It is my belief that \$2,000 is an extreme minimum for income," observed one librarian a decade ago.¹ He proceeded to underline his own phrase, "extreme minimum," by adding: "When salaries, books, and building maintenance all must be fully paid for and where the library cannot draw on other collections to supplement its resources, the budget should be greater." At about the same time a Canadian report advanced the figure of \$3,000.² An earlier statement by a student of rural life suggested the figure of \$4,000 as necessary for real library service.³

Several librarians have given greater scope to their opinions concerning a desirable minimum. An experienced library extension worker, basing her figures primarily on the minimum book needs of any group of modern readers, suggests \$15,000 to \$20,000 as a minimum.⁴ A student of library government, after outlining the essential elements of library service and postulating the administrative re-

¹ Carl Vitz, "The Library as a Governmental Agency," in Carl Vitz (ed.), *Current Problems in Public Library Finance* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1933), pp. 9-10.

² Commission of Enquiry, *Libraries in Canada: A Study of Library Conditions and Needs* (Toronto and Chicago: Ryerson Press and American Library Association, 1933), p. 10.

³ J. H. Kolb, *Service Institutions for Town and Country* (Research Bull. No. 66 [Madison: Agricultural Experiment Station of the University of Wisconsin and U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1925]), pp. 35-36.

⁴ Helen Gordon Stewart, "Advantages and Difficulties in the Administration of a Regional Library Unit," *Bulletin of the American Library Association*, XXVIII (September, 1934), 606.

quirements necessary to maintain the elements, reaches the figure of \$25,000.⁵ This same amount appears in the *Post-war Standards for Public Libraries*.⁶

An English librarian, McColvin, with the audacity that characterizes his whole recent report, suggests 300,000 persons as a desirable minimum population base for a library unit.⁷ The Library Association of Great Britain subscribes in substance to this figure.⁸ This is a sharp advance over the Association's figure of 20,000 in its 1927 report⁹ and illustrates the rapid development of regional library thinking in England. We must remind ourselves, however, that larger unit administration is facilitated in a unitary system of government in which local self-determination is neither as strong nor as complex as in our own country. Moreover, the geographic area occupied on the average in Great Britain by 250,000 people is about the same as that occupied by 25,000 in America.

These widely varying minimum figures reflect contrasting conceptions of adequate minimum library service. For each of the observers the declining curve of intimate personal service and the rising curve of book and staff resources cross at different points.

A STUDY OF DESIRABLE MINIMUM SIZE

The substance of the present paper presents an additional set of observations bearing on the problem of desirable minimum size of public library units. The justification for adding to the array of existing estimates is that the conclusions to be reported were based on a different set of criteria and a different method of observation from any of the figures reported thus far. Service rendered, rather than a combination of service, administrative criteria, and assumed general needs formed the basis of judgment. Observation of variations related to size was not incidental to observation for other purposes, nor was it applied to libraries which varied markedly in social and

⁵ Carleton Bruns Joeckel, *The Government of the American Public Library* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), pp. 316-17.

⁶ American Library Association, Committee on Post-war Planning, *Post-war Standards for Public Libraries* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1943), p. 46.

⁷ Lionel R. McColvin, *The Public Library System of Great Britain* (London: Library Association, 1942), p. 196.

⁸ Library Association, *The Public Library Service: Its Post-war Reorganization and Development* (London: Library Association, 1943), p. 7.

⁹ Great Britain, Board of Education, Public Libraries Committee, *Report on Public Libraries in England and Wales* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1927), p. 33.

financial characteristics—both conditions that do not take into account variables other than size that make for differences in service levels. The study was designed expressly to note variations in service with size, and it was applied in intensive fashion to a limited number of libraries which are more or less homogeneous in nature.

Approximately sixty public libraries which serve populations ranging in size from 5,000 to 75,000 were selected for study. The libraries cluster around several points within the 5,000–75,000 range, thus providing groups for purposes of comparison.

In order to observe the relationship of size to service, it was necessary to hold several related factors constant. To this end only libraries spending approximately 75 cents per capita were used, this being the largest income figure which would yield a sufficient number of libraries meeting the several conditions imposed. In an effort to equalize general price and salary levels, only libraries in the Middle West and libraries outside metropolitan areas were included. The latter condition, coupled with the exclusion of libraries in small cities with universities, removed the factor of proximity to other large libraries which modifies the program of metropolitan area agencies. Social variations were controlled to some extent by compiling a half-score social indices for each city, including age and occupation distribution, education and rent levels, and income-tax returns, and eliminating cities that deviated markedly from the average; for example, several cities with unusually high education medians and several with an unusual concentration of industry as shown by a disproportionate number of manual workers were excluded by this process. Finally, only municipal libraries were used, thus eliminating township, county, and regional libraries with their special distribution problems.

The sixty libraries were studied by means of questionnaires, checked lists of books held, and visits to observe the libraries in action. In all cases an effort was made to observe the *performance* of the libraries, as represented, for example, by the handling of reference inquiries or the adequacy of the material available at the time of visiting in some such area as postwar planning, in addition to the *preparation for performance*, as shown, for example, by the number of titles held on a check list or the level of formal education of the staff.

Because checked lists of titles have been used so extensively (and perhaps misused so extensively), a word concerning the lists used in this study is in order. The lists cover only subjects assumed to be

necessary in all the cities studied. The subjects included basic information tools, important American biography of the last century, personal health books of the last decade, recent materials on planning for peace and reconstruction, and outstanding children's books of the last five years. If the assumption that all typical American communities need essential books on personal health and postwar planning was incorrect, then check lists were also misused in this instance. The titles were not taken from a standard buying tool but were selected solely for this study and are titles that we would like to see in every library. For the most part it cannot be argued that while a library may not have certain titles on the list, it has other equivalent titles. What are the equivalents of autobiographies by Henry Adams, Jane Addams, and Lincoln Steffens? Is a minor biography of Robert E. Lee by Henry Shepherd a substitute for such works as Gamaliel Bradford's *Lee, the American*, or Douglas Freeman's *R. E. Lee*?

Number of copies as well as number of titles held were noted so that a library which decided to purchase three copies of an important title, rather than one copy of three different titles, was under no disadvantage. The evidence of the check lists was verified by general inspection at the time of visiting. In addition, the subject range of the evaluation was extended considerably by means of a list of twenty-five specific subjects on which material was sought at the time of visiting. The careful use made of check lists of titles in the present study makes returns from them acceptable as partial evidence on the quality of the holdings of the libraries.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

What were the results of the application of this procedure to three-score midwestern public libraries? Let us first state the bare elements of minimum public library service as a framework for reporting findings. The statement pretends to be neither original nor complete; it is merely a repetition of accepted service requirements which meet the need of the present inquiry.

First, minimum public library service should provide the basic and important current books of our time about common personal and social problems. These are not the only books that any single urban community would need: materials related to local industries or agriculture would also be needed, and most libraries feel a responsibility for furnishing materials used in connection with formal education in the schools. But *at least* these books should be in every community

library—and not because the library should have a well-rounded collection but because every community expresses a need and demand for them, and the area of personal and social problems is definitely within the scope of accepted public library purposes. Is there any public library that does not have a responsibility for providing Eve Curie's biography of her mother, Lippmann's *U.S. Foreign Policy*, or *Lassie Come-Home*?

Second, minimum public library service provides personal assistance by experienced librarians in such specialized areas as children's reading, adult reading, and information service. Specialized personnel enable libraries to adjust and concentrate service for distinguishable groups of readers. It is assumed here that libraries exist not only to provide and distribute materials, which requires skilful book selection and efficient circulation, but also to guide and stimulate reading, which requires reading-aid service in addition. It is also assumed that service is likely to be better to the extent that separate personnel, trained and experienced in this work, can be provided. The soundness of this assumption was borne out in using the libraries studied, for usually the quality of information and reading-aid assistance was lower in libraries where the user had to take a chance on finding behind the circulation desk qualified personnel with time to help him. Once again, the roster of specialized cataloging and book-organizing skill, children's reading aid, and adult information and reading aid is not a complete one, but *at least* these specialized services should be available in a public library worthy of the name.

Third, minimum public library service provides an organization of materials that facilitates and guides their use for popular educational purposes. This includes shelf classification for use, book arrangements to which the user can quickly orient himself, a simple, workable catalog, and selection and display of materials around themes of current interest. In other words, even the minimum-level library should show skill in merchandising its wares.

To this brief list one could add criteria of buildings, administrative organization, and other relevant topics. But these are the essentials. A library might still provide good service with a poor building and a cumbersome administrative organization, but it is doubtful if a library could provide good service without essential materials in common personal and social problems, without usable organization of materials, or without a staff prepared to interpret materials.

Materials.—The need for larger units is most clearly evident in re-

lation to material resources. A census of the reading needs of the people in a town of a few thousand is likely to reveal a range of subject interest as great as that in a city fifty or one hundred times as large, and presumably book stocks in each case should have similar scope. Even if one sets his sights as high as McColvin and uses some such figure as three hundred thousand volumes as a minimum, there are sure to be occasional readers with specialized interests, asking about the lives of Henry VIII's wives or rare forms of colloids, for whom the three hundred thousand volumes are "inadequate."

The designation of any size or scope of collection as minimum must, therefore, be arbitrary. A minimum level usually means "at least" the portion of the ideal that should be realized in practice.

The level of performance of recognized better libraries can be of assistance in determining desirable minimum levels by introducing criteria of best practice as against criteria that are entirely abstract. For this study five criteria libraries, selected by a group of competent judges as offering a high level of service, were used to aid in identifying desirable minimums. These are midwestern libraries serving populations under 75,000. They were not included among the regular libraries in the project because their financial support was higher than the level adopted.

The holdings of the five criteria libraries on the five check lists—covering, it will be remembered, the areas of basic information tools, outstanding biographies of the twentieth century, important recent books on postwar planning, health books of the last decade, and current children's classics—ranged from 76 to 89 per cent. The figure of 75 per cent was therefore adopted as a standard representing desirable holdings on the lists.

On this basis general adequacy in the provision of adult books in the subject areas surveyed is attained in libraries serving 35,000 population and spending \$7,000–\$8,000 per year on books. In the provision of children's books the desirable minimum level is attained regularly at a slightly smaller size in libraries serving 25,000 population and with an annual book budget of \$4,000. The general inspection of book collections made at the time of visiting corroborated these approximate size levels. Substantial provision of the most essential titles for popular educational reading is commonly achieved somewhere between the 25,000 and 35,000 population point in libraries having a per capita support of 75 cents.

Mention of a few of the titles lacking in most libraries studied below the 35,000 population level will make this observation more concrete. Although even the smaller libraries were likely to have standard biographies by Helen Keller and Hamlin Garland, they were not likely to have such similar standard items as Burroughs' *Journals*, Conrad's *Personal Record*, or Pringle's *Roosevelt*. Among current popular biography even the smaller libraries were likely to have items by Bellamy Partridge and Stefan Zweig, but they were not likely to have such similar and only slightly less popular items as Morison's *Admiral of the Ocean Sea*, Granville Hicks's *John Reed*, and Canby's *Walt Whitman*. In the field of postwar planning very few of the libraries below the 35,000 level were able to furnish relevant publications of the late National Resources Planning Board or complete statements of the Baruch and Beveridge reports.

Number of copies as well as number of titles held is also of importance. Presumably a library serving 75,000 people should have five copies of very popular titles if they are going to be as accessible as one copy in a library serving 15,000. In this connection a paradoxical point comes to light which can be best illustrated by holdings on the biography list. While the proportion of the lists held increased from 40 per cent to 90 per cent as population increased from 5,000 to 75,000, the number of copies per 1,000 adults decreased from 16 to 5. The implications of this variation were substantiated in visiting the libraries and may be stated as follows: The proportion of essential titles owned naturally increases as size increases, but the proportion of owned titles actually available to the reader at any one time *decreases* as size increases.

Personnel.—Degree of specialization of personnel in public libraries is not so closely related to size as is content of the book collection. This situation points toward factors other than size that make for adequacy of service. Such factors are not entirely lacking in the matter of book collections because some libraries make more skilful use of their financial resources than others; the considerable uniformity within size groups observed in the case of materials probably was due to a uniformly satisfactory level of skill in book selection. The most important factor other than size that relates to specialization of staff is the effectiveness of the *organization* of libraries. Here the degree of variation was sufficient to enable a few libraries serving populations as small as 15,000 to show some degree of staff specialization, while

other libraries with equal per capita financial resources and similar service responsibilities, serving populations as large as 50,000, failed to show effective specialization of tasks.

Some specialization of staff becomes theoretically possible in a library serving 9,000 or 10,000 people and with an annual income of \$7,000-\$8,000. A library of this size is likely to have three full-time staff members besides occasional part-time clerical or shelving help. Conceivably, one of the staff members can handle professional tasks for the most part and the others clerical tasks; or staff members could engage in all library tasks with one specializing in adult service and another in children's service.

It must be reported that in the libraries studied none at the 10,000 population level had realized this theoretical possibility. Indeed, not only libraries at this size level but many larger libraries fail to show development in the direction of particularization of service for major reader groups. Only one-half the institutions studied at the 35,000 population level have separate staffs for guidance and information service for children and adults. Evidently there is a substantial number of libraries across the country serving cities up to 35,000 population that will be staffed this very evening exclusively by assistants, all at the circulation desk, who had have the opportunity neither of formal training nor of specialized experience. It is a depressing experience to visit a few dozen libraries with \$25,000 annual income or more, to ask a few elementary reference or reading-aid questions of whatever staff members are available, and to receive assistance that shows about as much professional library ability as one expects of college freshmen. Even at the 50,000 population level, in libraries spending \$35,000 annually, specialization of staff is spotty; more than one library at this level made no provision for adult information and advisory service other than that which could be given at a relatively busy circulation desk by a heterogeneous group of staff members.

The first specialized worker to appear in the size scale is the children's librarian, who is found occasionally at the 15,000 population level and fairly regularly at the 25,000 level. However, careful analysis suggests that many of the children's librarians in the smaller libraries should be called juvenile circulation librarians, for most of their time is spent in circulation activities. Children's librarians devoting most of their time to juvenile book selection and reading guidance do not appear regularly until the 35,000 population level.

The cataloger, devoting all or a substantial part of her time to cataloging, also occurs regularly at the 35,000 population level and in about half the libraries at the 25,000 level. The advantages of specialization of staff were not so apparent in this area as in children's and adults' reading aid. The catalogs themselves were of a standard level of competency in libraries serving populations as small as 10,000 and began to show regular weaknesses only in the smallest group studied—those at the 5,000 population level. In other words, adequacy in catalogs is achieved in fairly small libraries, and separate catalogers in somewhat larger libraries merely represent a certain volume of work and not any increasing specialization of service.

The reference assistant for adults is the last of the accepted specialized assistants to appear and is not regularly a staff member until the 50,000 population level. This does not mean that reference and reading-aid service is never available below this size level. If the inquirer happens into one of the smaller libraries at a time when the librarian is at the circulation desk or readily available, and if there is no pressure of circulation work at the moment, service of high caliber may be obtained. But such occasions were certainly in the minority in the visits as a user made for this study. Failure to provide separate information and advisory service not only discourages the user and lowers the average level of service provided but also gives no opportunity for one or more staff members to develop the facility that comes only with regular experience. It is notable that librarians in cities of 25,000 and 35,000 population that give separate adult reading-aid service report that they wish they could give more, while libraries in cities of the same size that do not provide separate service report that there is little call for it.

Provision for guiding and stimulating reading.—Of the three essential elements of library service, the guidance and stimulation program appears to have the least relationship to size. From the standpoint of organization of materials to help readers in the field of popular education, one of the best libraries visited was in the 15,000 population group. In this library, books—and personnel to aid in their use—have taken over the predominant physical position usually occupied by the monumental circulation desk. Every other reading table in the library had a display of current substantial books, each table devoted to a major theme explained in a large poster, with pertinent subdivisions of the theme brought out by grouping materials around smaller explanatory signs. Distinctions between fiction and

nonfiction, between different classification numbers, and between books, pamphlets, and periodicals were disregarded in the displays. Organization of the printed page for use was so effective that at least one visitor soon found himself browsing through the world of current print, momentarily forgetting his own purpose.

Contrast this with the more typical library in which the circulation desk holds the strategic position, at once frowning on the reader and guarding the stacks of books behind. To the right is the reference room with long rows of encyclopedias, to the left the periodical and newspaper room with files of the *Saturday Evening Post* back to 1900. The only books on special display are rental items. Instead of effective organization of books for guidance, this library has life-size statues of "Venus" and "The Winged Victory"; these did not prove to be of any assistance in finding a suitable book.

The typical formalism of library arrangements and book organization is more apparent in the larger libraries, and devices for guidance are therefore needed more at this level. At about the 75,000 population point, the physical layout of existing library buildings becomes sufficiently complex to require considerable sleuthing on the part of the reader in order to orient himself. Perhaps if librarians were forced to *use* libraries other than their own occasionally, they would see the value in signs describing the location of materials and the content of services. When adult book collections pass the 40,000-volume mark, which occurs at the 35,000 population level, selection from the long rows of books of suitable items for any individual reader becomes noticeably more difficult. Also, as size of library increases toward the 75,000 point, there is a notable tendency for splitting up related subject material among widely divergent sections of the non-fiction shelves, as though the larger the library, the more the historical development of the classification scheme and not the current use of materials determines shelf assignment. Smaller libraries show no greater tendency to organize materials for stimulation and guidance, but they are somewhat less in need of such organization because of the small size and greater unity of their collections.

The distressing finding of the study was the limited number of libraries, large or small, that consciously sought to guide popular educational reading, either by physical arrangement or by bibliographical devices. Not more than 10 per cent of the libraries studied showed effective organization under this heading, and the 10 per cent were dispersed all through the size range. Evidently this type of service

is primarily a function of those rare souls, appearing in small libraries as well as large, who sense the popular education opportunity of the public library. Consciously or not, these rare librarians believe the library to be doomed to a minor role if it is merely a distributing agency in a time when the distribution of print is becoming increasingly more effective through nonlibrary channels, and they see the unique role of the library as a guidance agency in a period that is deluged with social communication.

CONCLUSION

It is only with difficulty that these diverse observations can be made to produce any single size level as the desirable minimum. Yet the study did indicate that the provisions of even modest essential elements of service were not attained with any regularity until the 50,000 population or \$40,000 income group. In the next lower group studied, serving 35,000 population with budgets of \$25,000, only about one-half of the libraries achieved the modest standard. However, because of several qualifications and limitations of the findings, there is no clear-cut basis in the study for stating categorically that every library unit should serve at least 50,000 people.

The difference between the minimum figures suggested here and figures suggested previously by Americans is due primarily not to any difference in evaluating libraries but to a higher conception of what library service should be. The librarian who suggested \$2,000 as a minimum ten years ago was not thinking of the same minimum of service used here; McColvin's much larger figure is based on a more exalted idea of what constitutes acceptable library service. This study has said merely that if you believe minimum library service, at this stage in our development, to be at least at the level suggested, then in practice it is not attained by many libraries serving less than 50,000 population.

Another limitation on the 50,000 figure is that theoretically the necessary elements could be achieved at a lower size level. To the extent that libraries sharpen and limit their objectives and thereby depart from the prevailing mixture of diversional and purposeful service, and to the extent that they reorganize personnel to take advantage of specialized skills and experience, the minimum figure could be lower. In other words, minimum desirable size could be approached either by larger units or by internal reorganization.

A final limitation to remember is that the study was confined to

municipal libraries in order to have a comparable group of institutions; it did not take the problem of distribution to a sparse population into consideration. Provision of satisfactory library service is costly enough among a concentrated population; it is likely to be more expensive per person when the distance factor must also be overcome. Actually, of course, the usual rural area service, which lacks immediate access to the full normal range of book supply and to specialized personnel, is cheaper than the usual city service. This poses the question whether we are willing to accept a dual standard for service at one level for the city and at a lower level for the country. If we believe that library service involves at least the elements suggested in this study, then the population minimum of 50,000 would need to be even larger when rural service is included.

Accepting for the moment the 50,000 figure, we note that not 10 per cent of present public libraries in the country approach this level. Indeed, only 30 per cent of the present *county* libraries in the country attain this size. If the comparison were made in terms of minimum budget rather than minimum population, it would be no more favorable. Pushing this unhappy analysis further, we note that only 15 per cent of all counties in the country contain the minimum population suggested and that these are primarily urban counties. In time the county library may be looked upon with the same disapproval that is currently directed against the independent library in the small municipality.

The American concept of library service has not prepared us to think in terms as large as those now contemplated by the British, and the American social and geographic scene is not as adapted to huge population units. Nevertheless, our thinking is moving toward larger concepts and at a rate that bids fair to outstrip the limited actual advances made. In relation to the changing concept of what constitutes library service, we may be further from minimum national coverage today than we were ten or twenty years ago.

